

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 4687

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, LE, SU
SUBJ: SYRIAN THREAT TO BREAK RELATIONS WITH US

REF: AMMAN 6533

1. WE QUESTION THE REPORTS, INCLUDING KING HUSSEIN'S
REPORT FROM BADRAN, THAT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS
SERIOUSLY CONSIDERING BREAKING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH US
FOLLOWING THE HOUSE REJECTION OF FY79 AID PROGRAM.
WHILE KHADDAM MAY HAVE SUGGESTED AS MUCH TO BADRAN AND
OTHERS, HE MUST EITHER HAVE BEEN POSTURING OR ACTING ON
THE BASIS OF MOMENTARY PIQUE. CERTAINLY SYRIAN OFFICIALS HAVE
BEEN AGNRY AT THE HOUSE ACTION BUT PRESIDENT ASSAD
IS TOO MUCH OF A PRAGMATIST TO REACT IN THIS FASHION.

2. IN THE FIRST PLACE, ANY SYRIAN MOVE TO ACT
AGAINST THE USG IS UNLIKELY TO FLOW FROM BILATERAL ECONOMIC
LINKS. THERE WOULD HAVE TO BE A POLITICAL
REASON, AND A VERY ACUTE ONE AT THAT. IN THE

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SECOND PLACE, BREAKING RELATIONS WITH US PROBABLY IS
TOO DRASTIC A MEASURE FOR ASSAD TO CONTEMPLATE UNDER
CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES.

3. IT IS NOT IN ASSAD'S INTEREST TO BURN HIS BRIDGES
WITH US AND HE KNOWS IT. HE NEEDS US FOR LEBANON,
WHERE HE RECOGNIZES A COMPLEMENTARY INTEREST. HE

BASICALLY WANTS PEACE, AND RECOGNIZES THAT THE US HAS A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN ACHIEVING THIS OBJECTIVE. HE HAS OPTED FOR WESTERN--AND PARTICULARLY AMERICAN--TECHNOLOGY AND REALIZES THAT A BREAK IN RELATIONS WOULD NOT EXACTLY FACILITATE MOVING EFFECTIVELY IN THIS DIRECTION.

4. MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THE HOUSE ACTION WOUNDED SYRIAN PRIDE, WHICH, AS IN MOST PARTS OF THE ARAB WORLD, IS CONSIDERABLE. THE SYRIANS STRESS THAT THEY DID NOT ORIGINALLY REQUEST THE AID AND THE DISBURSEMENTS HAVE BEEN SO SLOW THAT NO MAJOR ECONOMIC IMPACT WOULD BE CAUSED BY THE CUTOFF. BUT THE PEREMPTORY AND PUBLIC HOUSE ACTION LOOKED TO THE SYRIANS AS IF WE WERE IN EFFECT PENALIZING A SMALL BAD BOY AND THUS WERE SHOWING THEM UP IN FRONT OF THE WORLD. GIVEN THEIR PROFOUND SENSITIVITY, THEY RESENTED THIS WAY OF DOING THINGS.

5. YET, DESPITE THE BLASTS WE ARE GETTING FROM THE PRESS AND OTHERS ON THIS DEVELOPMENT, MORE CONTACTS HAVE NOT DEMONSTRATED ANY CHANGE IN THEIR ATTITUDES IN DEALING WITH US. FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM DID NOT EVEN RAISE THE MATTER WITH ME DURING OUR MEETING AND IN FACT STRESSED THAT HIS DOOR WAS ALWAYS OPEN TO ME FOR SUBSEQUENT DISCUSSION EVEN PRIOR TO THE CREDENTIALS

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CEREMONY.

6. IN SUM, THERE ARE UNDERLYING MUTUAL INTERESTS BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE US THAT CAN BE EXPECTED TO SEE US THROUGH

SOME ROUGH SLEDDING, AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO MILITATE AGAINST A BREAK IN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS.
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